Excavations in Bintacan Cave, Ifugau Province, Philippines

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UNLIKE SOME OF its neighboring provinces, Ifugao (Fig. 1), lying along the eastern slopes of the Cordillera Centrale, has almost no natural caves. Nothing can be found comparable to the great burial caverns of Sagada. The situation is such that Bintacan Cave, in the limestone of the gorge of the Ibulao River in southeastern Ifugao, is regarded as so exceptional that it has been given the status of a provincial park. In 1982 efforts were undertaken to accommodate tourists by improving what, by local standards, was already a sound trail.

The cave is relatively small, penetrating directly into the mountain (Plates I–II) for 26 m and then turning abruptly to the right for another 11 m. At that point it closes to a narrow vertical fissure that would best be left to speleologists. In an area about 15 and 20 m from the entrance, the floor slants away to the right and becomes a jumble of loose rocks. Local inhabitants claim that it marks what was once a descent within the mountain to the level of the river but was purposely filled in. The ceiling is uneven, being nowhere less than 2 m above the floor in the center, and in one area near the mouth of the cave it rises in a fissure so that one can see through to daylight.

To a modern tourist the most arresting thing about the interior of the cave would probably be the graffiti on the walls, which made it akin in a special way to the New York subway, each an example of twentieth century cave art. The graffiti and the evidence of a campfire on the surface near the entrance indicate that the cave is in current use, though sporadically and for purposes, real or imagined, that are unsettling to the older generation. Otherwise the human history of Bintacan is rather vague. One informant claimed that it had been discovered by hunters shortly before World War II and no one had ever lived in it. Another, however, said that it had been a place of refuge during a time when Ifugao was ravaged by an epidemic. This experience seems to have inspired the naming of the cave by Professor Alberto Crespilla, son of the legendary American administrator Jeff Gallman. Educated informants translated *bintacan* as "blessed." One speculated that it could be found in the translation of a prayer to Mary wherein the part "blessed art thou amongst women" is rendered "*benditacan abu am-in hi cababahae*" in the Kiangan area dialect. It is perhaps relevant to note that Crespilla grew up in that region.

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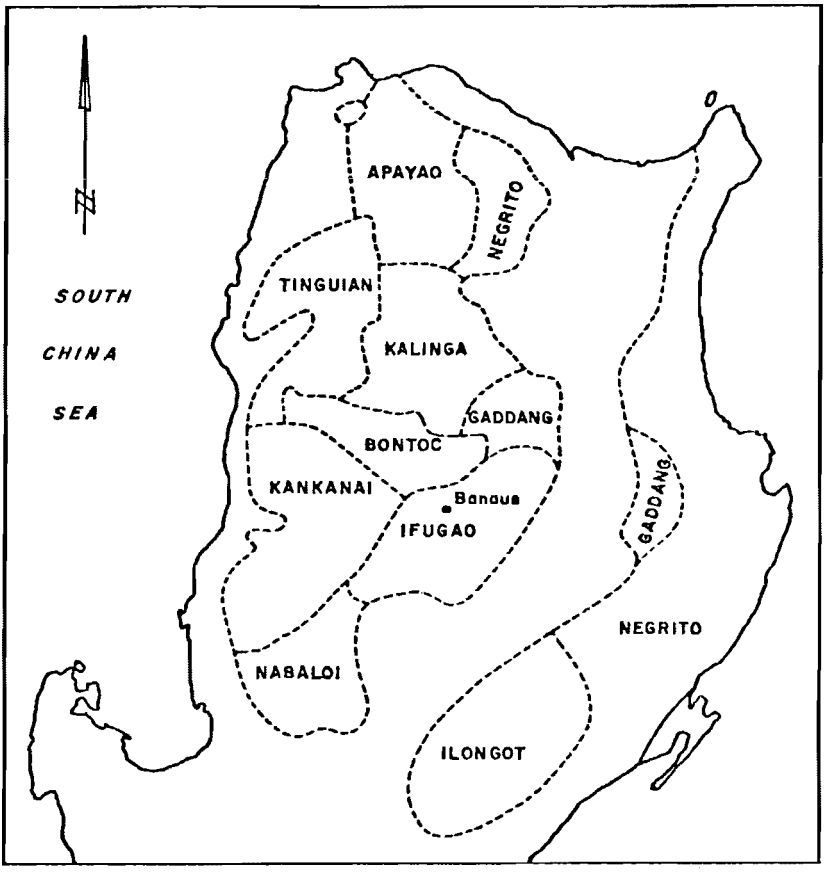

Fig. 1 Distribution of Non-Christian Ethnic Territories in Northern Luzon.

The excavations, whose results are reported here, were conducted in 1978 as a part of a season that also saw excavations at what remains of Kiyangan (Kiyyangan), the legendary ancestral village of the Ifugao. Both sites are associated with the Ibulao River, Kiyangan located on its broad floodplain near Lagawe and Bintacan just below, where the river has cut its way through the mountain about 2 km south of Lagawe (Figs. 2–3). The season's investigations were the most recent phase in a long-term research plan that had begun with excavations in the high valleys of the Banaue area and moved southeast and down to the lower valleys around Lagawe.

Aside from serving as a place of refuge from an epidemic and a game room for the younger set, local informants did not know of any time when the cave was inhabited. I have acquired a high regard for the Ifugao's knowledge of his history and environment, but it seemed that Bintacan had too many attractive features not to have figured more importantly at some time in human affairs. Particularly, we hoped to find a pre-Ifugao occupation. Unfortunately, we did not; we did find something else that does not appear to be Ifugao.

Three 1.5 m test squares were excavated in 10 cm levels, number 1 near the entrance, number 3 the farthest in where the stalactites-stalagmites form a natural

Plate I Location of Bintacan Cave indicated by arrow. Note buildings in lower left for scale.

Plate II Entrance to Bintacan Cave partially concealed by fallen block of limestone.

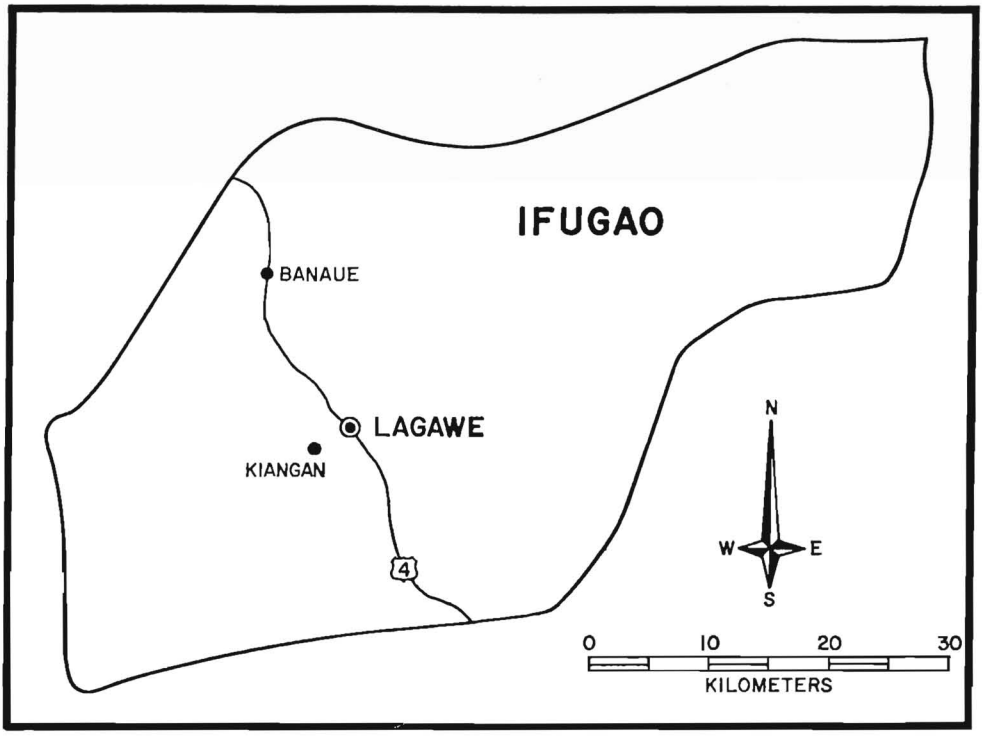

Fig. 2 Ifugao Province.

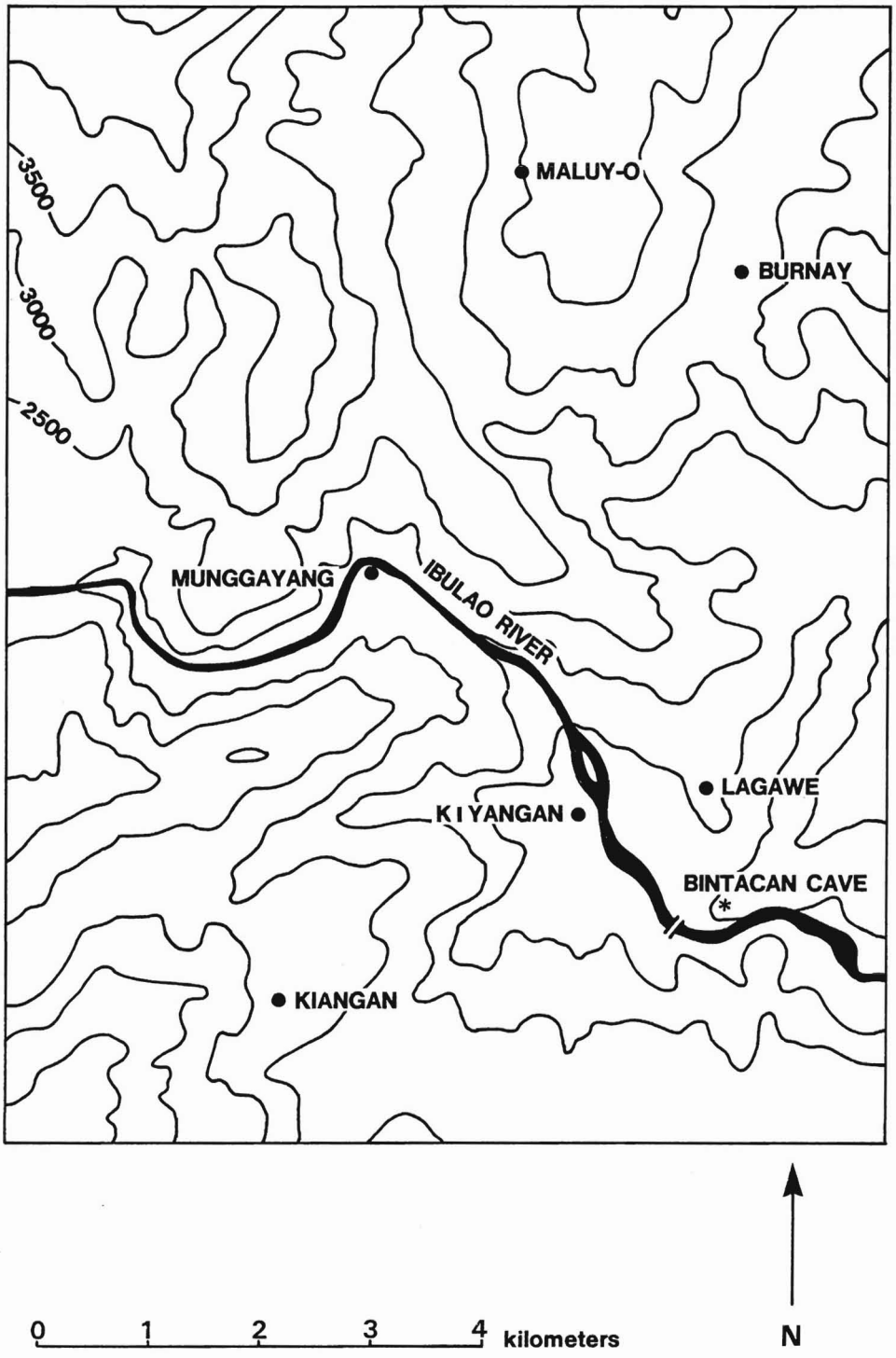

Fig. 3 Bintacan Cave.

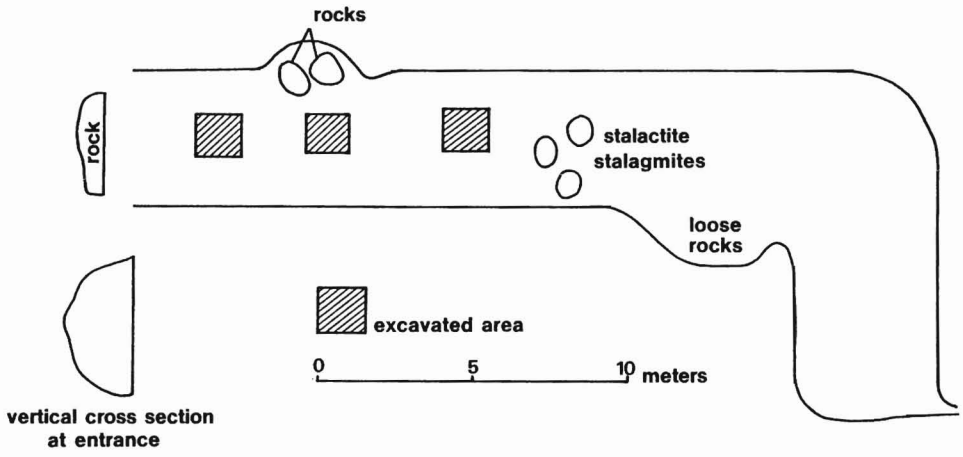

Fig. 4 Map of Bintacan Cave indicating areas of excavation.

barrier, and number 2 in between (Fig. 4). Cultural material was found in each but in very different amounts. A total of 395 sherds was recovered, 4 from square number 1 near the entrance, 8 from square number 3, and 383 from square number 2. The latter was apparently in the main area of habitation (Pl. III). The results from the three squares indicate that it was relatively small, apparently occupying less than 10 m^2, far enough from the entrance to be removed from the elements but no farther. The number of people living in the cave at any one time could not have been large.

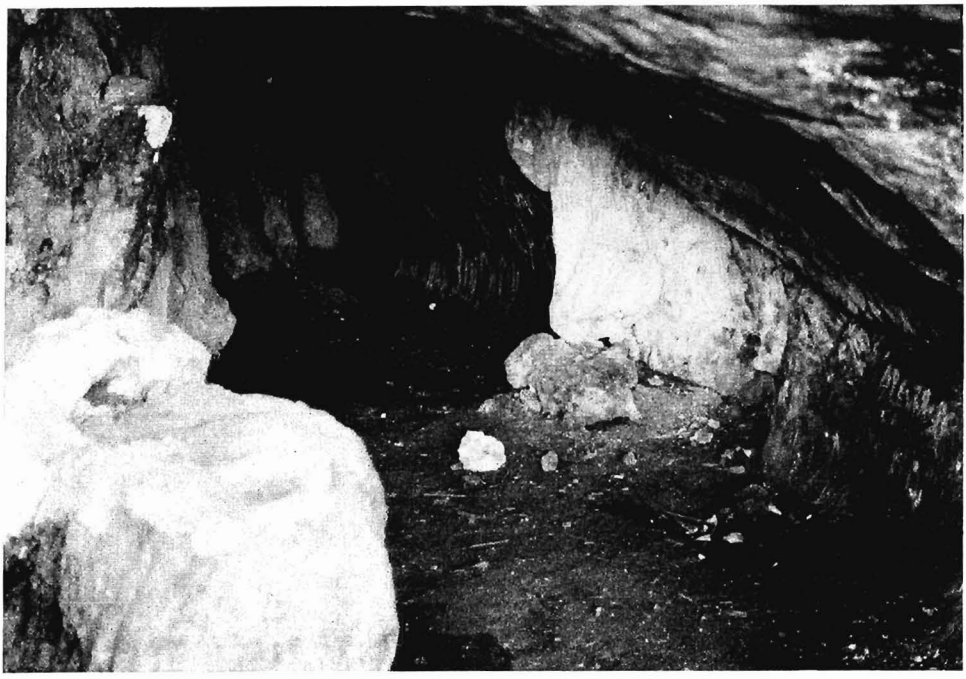

Plate III Habitation area in Bintacan Cave as seen from the entrance.

No natural strata were evident in the excavated areas. Although it showed no soil differences from the others, Level D, in square 2, at a depth from 30 to 40 cm, produced no cultural materials of any kind. All other levels in that central square, both above and below D, contained artifacts down to the rock floor at a depth of 65 cm. It would seem that there was a distinct but temporary interruption in the occupation of Bintacan Cave.

Each of the squares was taken down to the rock of the original cave floor. Depths differ between and within squares because of the unevenness of the bedrock. The depth of square number one varied from 45 to 88 cm, with the deepest artifact—a lone potsherd—being found at 48 cm. Square number two had 65 cm of deposit except along its eastern edge where the rock floor rose sharply to within 10 cm of the surface. The depth of square number three varied from 30 to 100 cm. Two of the eight sherds found in this square were at a depth of 12 cm. The rest were between 72 and 98 cm. The data from square number three are sparse, but they support the evidence of a break in continuity of occupation in square number two.

While the sherds found at Bintacan are not plentiful, they are interesting. Of the thousands of ceramic fragments recovered in the 23 sites we have excavated in Ifugao Province, only a few have any kind of decoration (Maher 1981:230–231). With the exception of a very small number from Kiyangan village, those that do have decoration show no resemblance to the designs that came from Bintacan Cave. All of the sherds from Bintacan Cave are small and most are undecorated. Some of these are indistinguishable from those excavated at sites that are unquestionably Ifugao. Others, however, have indications of sharp shoulders and flat bottoms that have not been associated with the Ifugao ceramic tradition.

The decorated specimens appear to fall into three categories. One, represented by sherds A, B, and C in Plate IV, have large, circular punctates that completely penetrate the wall of the pot along the rim or neck in a clustered pattern. The rims are thick and sharply everted. In all, there are nine of these, seven from level B (10–20 cm), one from level C (20–30 cm), and one from level E (40–50 cm) (Pl. IV). The latter has a line of punctates near the rim that go entirely through the pot, but they are of a smaller diameter than the others, about 2 mm as compared to 5 mm. It also shows indication of red paint on its outer surface, but the area is rather eroded. Richard Shutler and Brian Snow (pers. comm. 1980) have examined these specimens and made comparisons with the collection from Andarayan in Cagayan province. They found that the rim form and decorations on the Bintacan sherds are not repeated in the Andarayan series as a whole, but a single sherd found in an irrigation ditch at that site is indeed similar. Further, the sherds indicating angled shoulders and flat bases that are anomalous in Ifugao collections were said by Shutler and Snow to be common among the Andarayan specimens.

In a separate communication, William Beyer (pers. comm. 1979) reports that he remembers seeing pots with such punctates as a child in north central Ifugao. They were placed mouth down over burned chicken or duck feathers in an artificial cave dug in or near the village, there being no natural caves in that part of Ifugao. The feathers attracted honey bees, which entered through the punctate holes and built their combs inside.

A second category of decorated sherd is represented by D and F in Plate IV. These have a row of small, shallow punctates just below and parallel to the rim. One may have had an associated large punctate but the evidence for the latter is not clear.

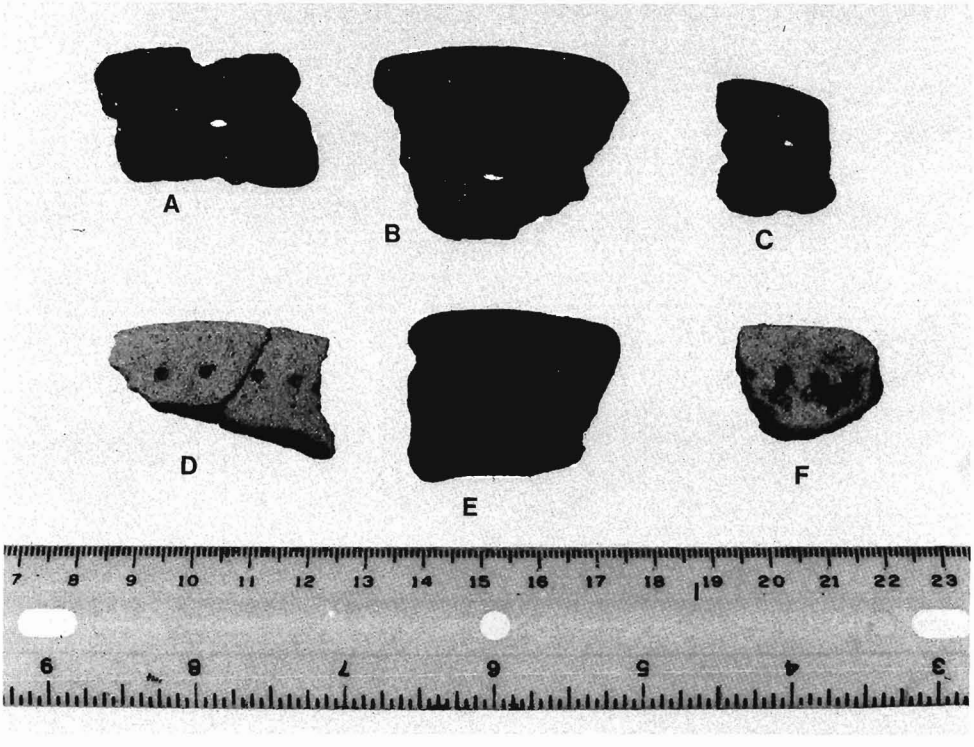

Plate IV Sherds with punctuate decorations from Bintacan Cave.

There are three sherds with the small punctate design, all from level B. Shutler and Snow found no similar pottery at Andarayan; it is also unfamiliar to Beyer's experience in Ifugao. Barbara Thiel, in her excavations at the Lal-lo shell middens on the Cagayan River in Cagayan Province [see Thiel this issue; Ed.], found sherds with similar small punctates in geometric patterns. Some appear to be the same as those at Bintacan, a single line paralleling the rim. Others are in much more complex arrangements. In addition to these designs, Thiel reports some of the large, perforating punctates.

The third category of decoration found in the Bintacan collection is at least as unusual for Ifugao as the varieties of punctates. Two of the sherds, both from level B in square number two, have painted designs on their outer surfaces. One appears to be a fragment of an angled shoulder (Pl. V*a*, B) with red diagonal at intervals of about 2 mm along only one side of the shoulder. The other (Pl. V*a*, A) seems also to be from a shoulder section even more strongly angled than the other. In this specimen the red lines are at the same interval but on both sides of the shoulder and crosshatched. A number of sherds—it is difficult to be exact since there are varying degrees of flaking and erosion—may have been from pots that were painted red over all or a large part of their outer surfaces. The application of a red clay slip is not uncommon on sherds from other Ifugao sites, although it is rather curious that none of the living potters interviewed reported the process. Some of the Bintacan specimens may have been slipped, but some, for example Plate IV, appear to have been

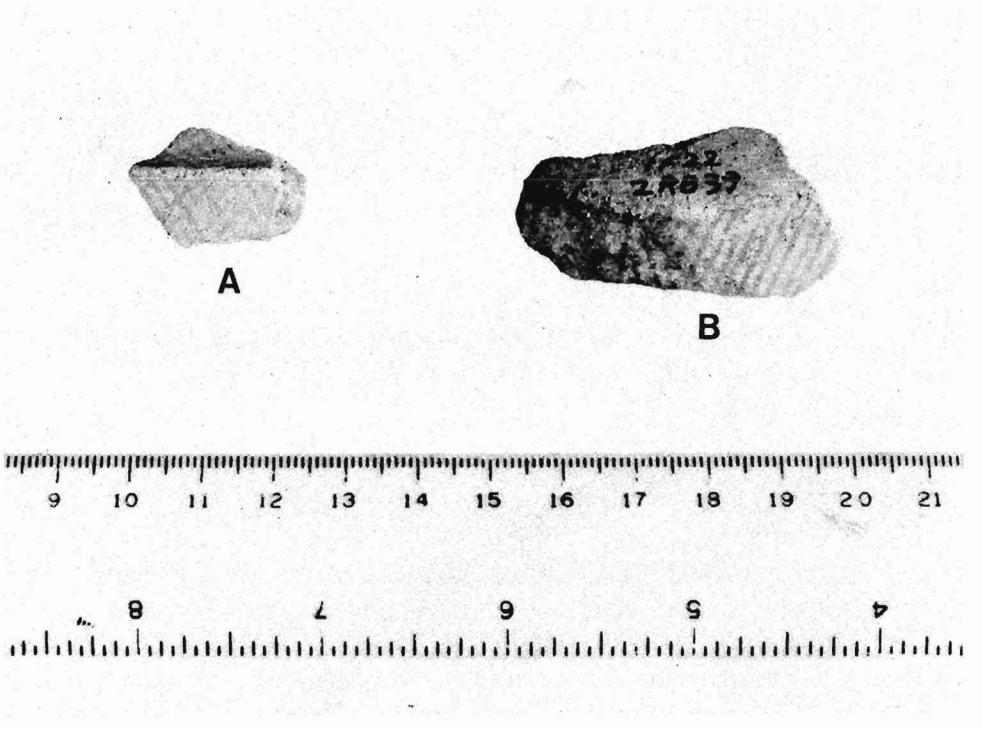

Plate V*a* Painted pottery.

painted with some red pigment on their outer surfaces only. Every level, except sterile level D, produced sherds that show indications of that treatment.

The ceramic complex at Bintacan Cave is quite distinct from that discovered at the other 22 sites excavated in Ifugao. At those sites, the pottery could descriptively be called Ifugao Plain Ware. Some of the specimens at Bintacan are probably of that type, but their plainness and the small size of the sherds leave open the possibility that they could represent a plain ware from another source.

NON-CERAMIC MATERIALS

One artifact of stone was found in level B of the second square (Pl. V*b*). Smooth and symmetrical, its surface is coated with a limestone wash that was probably produced by the flow of rainwater upon the limestone of the cave. Beneath the superficial limestone coating the object is of weathered diabase. Its form reminds one of a pestle and, indeed, such tools are found in Ifugao. William Beyer (pers. comm. 1979) remembers his great grandmother using a similar stone pestle with a small stone mortar to grind betel (areca) nut and food for a child or a toothless adult. The pestle is called *ludih* and is also used to grind pepper. Sometimes part of a coconut shell serves as a mortar, and some pestles are of wood rather than stone. The one found in Bintacan Cave is 72 mm long and 25 mm at its greatest diameter.

The environment of the cave is damp and perhaps accounts for the small array of organic specimens. This array may also reflect a casual and brief occupation by small

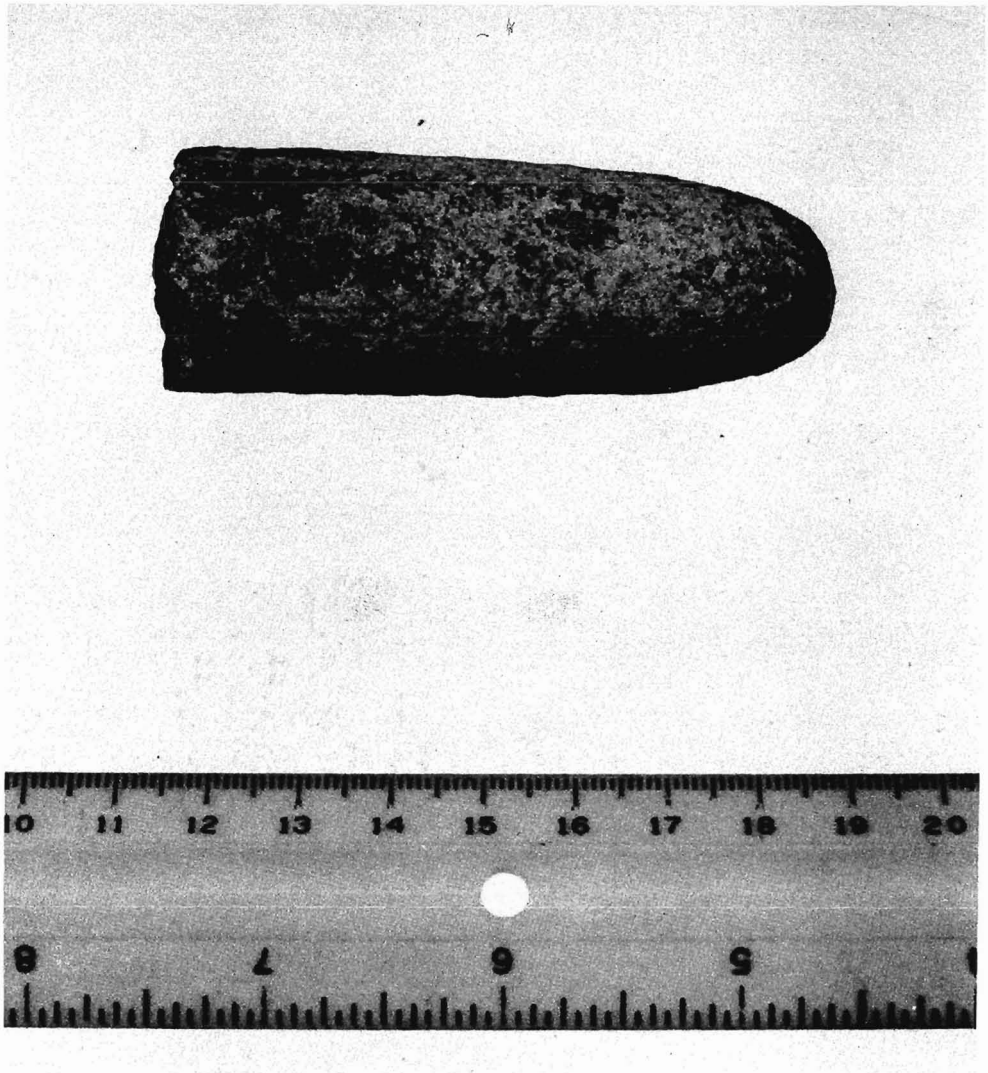

Plate V*b* Stone pestle.

groups on the move. Seven snail shells came from level A, square number two, and one from level B. All are of the genus *Cohlostyla*. Unidentifiable fragments of shell, probably snail, were found in levels B and D of square number three. Finally, the molar of an immature pig was recovered from level E of that square.

DATING

Small fragments of charcoal were scattered through all levels of the excavation. Except for the top level, none was of a size suitable for radiocarbon analysis. Consequently, sherds were submitted to Alpha Analytic, Inc. for thermoluminescence dating. Samples were selected from basal level F, level C immediately above the

sterile level, and from level E below it. The TL dates carry a possible error of 20 percent. The results, are regular and plausible. The date returned for level F is 1620 B.P. (± 20 percent) (Alpha-476), 1420 B.P. (± 20 percent) (Alpha-480) for level E, and 760 B.P. (± 20 percent) (Alpha-479) for level C. The dates are similar to those obtained by radiocarbon analysis of samples from Ifugao villages in the nearby Burnay district (Maher 1981:235).

CONCLUSIONS

From the evidence it would appear that Bintacan Cave served to shelter and perhaps conceal (PL. VI) small groups of people for more than 1500 years. Any particular occupation was probably quite temporary and during the time that level D was deposited, about 1000 years ago, the cave seems to have served no one. The artifacts recovered from other levels indicate an Ifugao presence, but they also point to an intrusion of foreign elements as well. From present evidence the most likely source is Cagayan Province. The non-Ifugao artifacts may have come to the site through diffusion, but why have they been found only in Bintacan Cave and, with the exception of a slight presence at Kiyangan village, not at any of the other 22 sites excavated in Ifugao? If they were brought from the north by the people who made them, what was the purpose of that small party? If they had come on a peaceful trading mission, why did they not stay in one of the nearby Ifugao villages, which certainly would have been more convenient for the enterprise. Further, there is still the question of lack of evidence of their trade in the villages. It may be, of course,

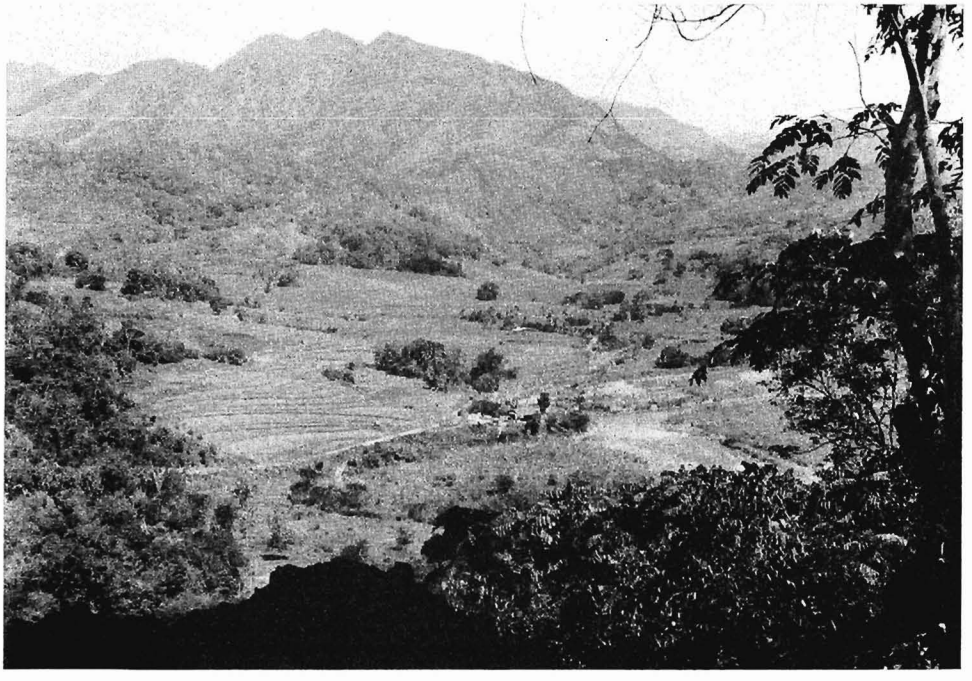

Plate VI The view from Bintacan Cave overlooking Ifugao villages and fields in the flood plain of the Ibulao River. The cave combines the qualities of concealment and vantage point.

that the trade was in perishables, and artifacts, such as the painted pottery, were minor elements. Certainly, the ethnographic and archaeological evidence reveals a general lack of interest on the part of the Ifugao in ceramic innovations.

Another possibility, in keeping with a site near Ifugao villages but hidden from them, was that Bintacan Cave at times sheltered raiding parties from the Cagayan valley. One must then, however, account for the apparent intermixing of Ifugao artifacts with foreign ones. It would seem that interpretation at this point requires evidence not yet available.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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